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The Roaring Girl

By W. O. G. Loft



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The Roaring Girl

By W. O. G. Loftis

To say who was the most colorful thief who ever lived would be a highly debatable statement. Most countries throughout the world will lay claim to him—the U.S.A. would probably claim Jesse James or Billy the Kid; Australia would undoubtedly declare that he was the one and only Ned Kelly, the Bushranger. France, in all probability, would say the very clever Vidocq detective/thief; whilst England—whose history extends back further than any of the above countries—would without hesitation name Robin Hood, the outlaw of Sherwood Forest, or that dashing Highwayman of the Road, Dick Turpin.

There were, of course, many other famous thieves in English history, but their deeds have been somewhat obscured by the exploits of these two characters. With their activities greatly exaggerated by romantic writers, the public in general have accepted many of their mythical deeds as fact.

But easily one of the most colorful of England's other famous thieves which I have come across in my researches into history, was—surprisingly!—not a man but a woman. She was known at the height of her notoriety by the nickname of "Moll Cutpurse," and her life and exploits read as sensationally as the most colorful fiction.

Born at the Barbican in the City of London about 1585, some three years before the glorious victory over the Spanish Armada, she was baptised under her real name of Mary Frith. Her father was a hard-working and highly respectable shoemaker, whilst her mother, by all accounts, was a normal and adoring parent who lavished all her loving care on her. But it has been recorded that Mary, when born, came into the world with her fists doubled up with rage—a sense of grievance perhaps which was to accompany her all her life.

Whatever other facts may have been related about Mary, there is one fact which cannot be disputed. She was dreadfully ugly. After the weaning stage, and when she should—like a normal child—have started to learn, she would bite, spit, scratch and twist her unprepossessing features into even more horrible contortions. At this period of history, which was a highly superstitious age, people (perhaps quite rightly) assumed that she was possessed by the devil.

When she was about ten, having no feminine leanings towards sewing or housework, Mary used to slip off to the Bear Garden and watch with delighted and avid interest the cruel sport of Bear-baiting, where bears in deep pits were matched in fights against savage dogs. This spectacle, like cock-fighting has of course long been banned in England.

Another of her pastimes was to hang around the doorways of taverns of ill repute and leer and pull faces at the men as they passed through. Certainly not the training for a young lady of the future!

In time, as she grew into a young woman, Mary also found that she had as much strength as a man and she liked nothing better than to pick fights in

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the street. More often than not her opponents, to their astonishment, were beaten almost senseless; and were only too glad to accept the fact that Mary was their superior in the art of fisticuffs.

As already chronicled, Mary was repulsive in appearance and—accepting the fact that she could never attract the opposite sex—discarded her woman's clothing and dressed in a man's coat and breeches. Walking like a man with long swinging strides, she adopted this mode of dress right to the end of her days.

The reader who might by this time have assumed that Mary would develop Lesbian tendencies because of her mannish behaviour, would be sadly mistaken. She wanted badly to be loved by the opposite sex and—having no illusions of her own appearance—would simply force the man of her attentions to make love to her, using sheer brutal force. She would at times use bribes as well as blows. A satisfactory lover was sometimes rewarded with guineas—which he probably thought was more hardly earned than anything else he had ever done in his life.

Her family was, of course, fully aware and greatly alarmed by Mary's disgraceful activities. A council of leading members of the family gathered together in converse and on the suggestion of an uncle, a clergyman, it was decided that Mary should be sent to the Puritan Colony, in New England, in an effort to bring her to her senses. The idea was to get her away from evil influences in the hope that she might perhaps settle down, marry, and lead a pure life. Showing some slight signs of repentence, Mary surprisingly agreed to their proposals, but while on board the ship just leaving Gravesend (seeing her beloved taverns disappearing from sight) Mary had second thoughts. She plunged into the River Thames and swam back to shore, to continue her life as before.

Plunging now in a life of complete depravity, Mary made her home in taverns and houses of ill-fame. She greatly surprised the "madams" of the brothels by asking them to supply male lovers to meet her demands. She invented swear words and obscene jokes and lewd stories, and hardly a word escaped her lips which was not punctuated by some foul remark.

She also joined a group of petty thieves, whose operations were never less inadequately described. They would waylay young children in the street and steal from them money entrusted to them for errands—one of their gentler forms of crime! By this time Mary had begun to supplement her earnings by telling fortunes, her clients mostly being young apprentices and simple servant girls. She varied her predictions according to how much she thought they could pay—a large payment would of course predict a rich marriage, a life of good health and happiness, whilst a poor one would mean, for the unhappy client, a future of gloom and poverty.

It is common knowledge that every person, however humble, has some talent and Mary soon found hers. She had the long thin hands of a clever magician and with the aid of a tool called the cly-filer, could slit open the pockets of a gentleman's tail-coat and extract his purse full of gold or guineas. This, as one can imagine, was a highly profitable occupation. (It should be mentioned that at this period of time, the pocket had only just been invented. Prior to this, purses were usually hung from a girdle, and it had been learned by bitter experience that this mode of carrying valuables was an open invitation to a nimble thief with a pair of scissors.)

It was owing to her extraordinary skill in slitting open pockets that Mary Frith earned the nickname of "Moll Cutpurse."

"Good looks often bring a girl a shameful brat," she is recorded as saying, "but cutting purses will cause no woman sorrow." A cut-purse, incidentally,

was the old English word for a pickpocket.

"To have an open ear—a quick eye, and a nimble hand is necessary for a Cutpurse."

Shakespeare. Winters Tale. IV. 3.

Moll was caught several times and convicted to be branded on the hands, a punishment which was assumed to be a deterrent to thieves. But with corruption so rife in the 16th century she was always able to bribe the officials and escape this punishment, continuing her activities with renewed energy.

As was to be expected, it was inevitable that a woman of Moll's peculiar talent would not remain long content with common thieving. She wanted to get on in the world and with the roads in those days little better than cart-tracks, and invested with highwaymen, she decided to join the bands of dashing "adventurers" who roamed the Kings Highway.

It should be added that Moll was a fine horsewoman. Her fearlessness and contempt of danger made her a highly successful highwayman. Surprisingly enough—although like Robin Hood she defied the law of the land, working against it—she was a good Loyalist, devoted to the cause of King Charles I. She hated the Roundheads and their leader, Oliver Cromwell.

On one occasion she was able to satisfy her strong political views by holding up no less a famous person than General Fairfax on Hounslow Heath, after a fight in which Fairfax was wounded in the arm and had both his horses shot. Moll was able to escape with her booty, but Fairfax was a man of great power—being Cromwell's right-hand man—and was soon able to catch Moll. She was taken in irons to the dreaded Newgate Prison.

If the highwayman had been other than Moll Cutpurse he would probably have been instantly executed. But the General was more amused than annoyed at Moll's escapade, especially when he discovered that she was a woman of means. He settled for a sum of two thousand pounds for her release, which was quite satisfactory to the rebel coffers. Moll's life was spared and she was freed.

During her career as a highwayman—or should it be a highwaywoman?—Moll made many friends in the field of crime. The notorious Captain Hinds, Mull Sack (a rather obscure person whose claim to fame is that he once held up and robbed Cromwell in The Mall) and a really colorful criminal named Crowder who used to emulate Robin Hood by dressing up as a Bishop and surprising his victims on the road, subsequently robbing them.

Probably due to her unfortunate experience with General Fairfax, Moll presently decided to settle for a quieter life and bought a public house in the famous Fleet Street in London. It was while she was acting as hostess in this tavern that she conceived the brilliant idea of receiving and selling stolen goods.

Soon her tavern was known to every thief in London, and nearly all the proceeds of all the robberies found their way there. She was well known to the public as a fence and people knew where to go to get their property back—many an outraged citizen was forced to pay handsomely for his own goods!

An amusing story is told of how a country farmer, ignorant of Moll's peculiar fame, saw his stolen watch hanging up behind the bar whilst having a drink at her tavern. He made haste to the authorities, and they had no option but to arrest her. She was again lodged in Newgate Prison. At the trial, when the farmer was required to show the watch in court (it had been returned to him in the meanwhile) he found to his astonishment that it had disappeared.

The charge had to be dropped and Moll was set free through lack of evidence. She had solved her own case by simply stealing the watch back from the farmer, who probably left London a sadder and wiser man in consequence!

Apart from her brokery business, Moll invented all kinds of new shady

business activities. She encouraged thieves to steal even the ledgers of various merchants and tradesmen, knowing full well that they would be more than anxious to buy back their accounting books—which in most cases showed rather dubious transactions on behalf of their owners.

Blackmail was another of this amazing woman's specialties. The houses of rich people and the "gentry" were searched for compromising letters—which were, of course, bought back by the relieved persons concerned at very large sums.

But probably the most monstrous business which Moll ever indulged in was that of a procuress. To her tavern in Fleet Street would come rich and mostly old men, wanting young girls for their evil desires. Moll would then go out into the streets and pick up these young persons—many of them girls who had run away from home or come up from the country and provinces to seek fame and fortune on the streets which were supposedly "paved with gold."

Promising them good servant positions in her own house, Moll would get them into the tavern, then beat and terrify them into submission. Apart from this she would watch their subsequent sufferings through a peep-hole in the wall, gloating. It might be that the reason for this was that—cheated by her own ugliness from experiencing love from the opposite sex—she gratified her frustrated desires by watching these girls degraded and despoiled.

For years Moll was able to carry on her nefarious activities without interference from the law. Yet—like Al Capone, who was eventually arrested on a more or less simple charge of Income Tax evasion—she was finally arrested on an equally irrelevant account. After an escapade in which she rode through the streets of London to win a wager, she was charged with "appearing in public dressed in mannish apparel." It is puzzling to see how she was not arrested before on this charge—unless, in view of her extreme ugliness, it was thought she could not possibly be a woman and must, therefore, actually be a man!

At this absurd trial Moll was found guilty and sentenced to do penance dressed in a white sheet on the steps of St. Pauls Cross (now St. Pauls Cathedral) during the Sunday morning's service. Moll had greatly enjoyed the publicity of her trial and far from being dismayed at the sentence she looked forward to being the centre of attention once more. Apart from that, the crowd which would gather would provide rich pickings for her gangs of pickpockets, who would be there in force.

Getting almost blind drunk after three quarts of sack (dry wine) it was said that Moll spent the time of her penance in a drunken stupor, to the disappointment of the crowd.

In spite of her own ugly appearance Molly had a fine taste for antiques and treasures of art. Her house was full to overflowing with them. She was also very fond of animals and her dogs were given food at which the King himself would not have turned up his nose. Brightly-colored parrots were to be found in every room in the house, but her most amazing trait was the collecting of mirrors. Hundreds if not thousands of mirrors were all over the walls and ceilings—as though she liked nothing better than to see her mannish figure and repellent features from all angles.

With such an enormous income resulting from all sources, it was not to be wondered at that in time—due to her soft living—Moll's appearance changed. She became fat and bloated, and so hideous in appearance, and so foul-smelling that people would cross to the other side of the street to avoid her.

In later years Moll suffered from dropsy, when her legs swelled to the size of "mill-posts" and her countenance equalled that of the famous Mother Shipton mentioned in my recent WITCHES article. Astonishing as it may seem to the opponents of smoking today, Moll claimed that her longevity was due

to the smoking of the foul clay pipe she favored. It is also worth recording that she was the first woman known to have smoked tobacco in England.

Moll Cutpurse eventually died, aged seventy-three, in her home in Fleet Street, a few doors away from the Globe Tavern—a place where the writer himself has met friends from London's famous street of journalism. Eccentric in life, she was equally eccentric in death, and her will decreed that her body should be buried face downward. She, who had defied all the conventions in life, also wanted to defy the convention of death and the grave.

She was buried in the churchyard of nearby St. Bridget, where an epitaph by the famous poet, John Milton, was placed on her tombstone. That John Milton (1608/1674) who ranks next to William Shakespeare in English literature, should have written about such a scourge of society as Moll Cutpurse may seem remarkable to the modern reader, but the attitude of people towards crime in those days was far different to what it is now!

Briefly, their view was that crime was an inconvenience to the public rather than anything else, and they were not concerned with the moral aspect of it. Once the "inconvenience" had been removed, either by hanging or by natural death—assuming the criminal was lucky enough to escape the harsh retribution of the law—they saw no reason at all why the deeds of such a person as Moll Cutpurse should not be written about. As an example of this attitude of mind one only has to remember the romantic "deeds" of Robin Hood and Dick Turpin.

But Moll Cutpurse's tombstone, alas, was not to remain for posterity. A few years later the Great Fire of London was raging, starting in 1666, and St. Bridget's Church—along with eighty-eight others—was completely destroyed. A search through the British Museum and Record offices, however, reveal that the epitaph was recorded, and it is—in full—as follows:

Here lies under this same marble
Dust for Time's last sieve to garble
Dust to perplex a Sadducee
Whether it rise a He or She
Or two in one, a single pair
Nature's sport and now her care.
For how she'll clothe it at Last Day
Unless she sighs it all away,
Or where she'll place it none can tell,
Some middle place, twixt Heaven and Hell.
And we'll tis Purgatory is found,
Else she must hide under ground
These reliques do not deserve the doom
Of that cheat Mahomet's fine Tomb,
For no communion she had
That when the world shall be calcin'd
And the mixd' mass of human kind
Shall sep'reate by that melting fire,
She stand alone, and none came nigher
Reader, here she lies till then,
When, truly, you'll see her again.

Psychiatrists today would have easily pin-pointed Moll Cutpurse's road to crime. Her ugliness as a child and in adult life, which resulted in her being shut off from friends and from love, turned her against her fellow-men and women, and she revenged herself upon them—and perhaps gained some measure of distorted satisfaction—in committing her evil deeds.

There was some suspicion that Moll might have been a hermaphrodite,

but an examination by surgeons after her death proved that she was a hundred-per-cent female.

Plays featuring Moll's adventures, eccentricities and ill-doings, were produced many times during the 17th century. Most of them were titled THE ROARING GIRL—and what better way to bring this chronicle to an end than to record that no greater Roaring Girl ever lived than Moll Cutpurse?

BROWSING AROUND

by Jack R. Schorr

One Saturday afternoon I visited several book stores in the Pasadena area and came up with a few books I thought you would be interested in hearing about. Not that they are rare or particularly valuable, but I had never seen them before. However, they may be on your shelves.

I picked up a nice copy of "Don Malcolm" by I. T. Thurston, published by A. L. Bradley and Co., Boston, 1896. A story of a boy's adventures visiting Washington and other historic places at the time of President Cleveland. Thurston also wrote "Boys of Central" and others. The book is bound in blue-grey linen cloth with two boys riding bicycles, in silver, on the cover. Lettering is in silver on the spine and red on the front.

The next book I found was "The Worst Boy" by our friend Edward S. Ellis, published by American Tract Society, 1912. Story about Dick Chandler, the worst boy that Berwyn Township ever produced. Apparently he was the worst boy until he made the acquaintance of Dwight L. Moody, the noted evangelist of that day. This book is bound in maroon cloth with white lettering. I doubt if there are many copies lying around.

Another interesting book was "The Big Horn Treasure" by John F. Carrill, a rattling good story of a Rocky Mountain adventure. This book is well illustrated by an artist named L. Haskell who knew something about drawing. It was published by A. C. McClure & Co. of Chicago, 1897. It is light blue binding with the cover attractively illustrated with 5 circles in gold, a large one in the center with a Big Horn mountain goat head in it, in gold, and four smaller circles with money bags in each. It is an excellent story in

which Phil Wentworth went to Colorado with his widowed mother and a school chum Ken Carter, to straighten out Phil's late father's investments in that state, Phil's father having died quite suddenly.

I don't have too many juveniles by McClure, except for the Dunn Civil War series, and so I was happy to find this.

Another one I found which I am sure most juvenile collectors have, but for me was a first, was E. J. Huston's "Boy Geologist." Altemus did an excellent job with the binding. It was done in dark green with a scene on the front depicting two boys poling a boat, with a camping scene in the background in red, yellow and black.

I came across my first Jack Race series on this trip. "Jack Race, Air Scout" by Harry Hale published by Hearst International Library, 1915. Nicely bound in tan with aeroplane flying across the countryside on the cover. The lettering is black and red. I wish I could find the rest of the series.

The last one I picked up was "Bolivar Brown" by Bide Dudley, Harper Brothers, 1921. I mention this because of the illustrations in pen and ink by Harry Wood. This book abounds in the humorous escapades of a couple of boys. The adventures and misadventures of Bolivar Brown and his friends will keep you in stitches from page 1 to the end. One illustration by Wood shows a children's parade with a drummer, a dogcart carrying a chicken in a coop and a boy with a sign which reads:

"Gran show today

Ole Blacksmith shopp

For benifit of the Heathen
of the Methodist Church and
the Cave — Come."

So that's what I found one Saturday afternoon a few weeks ago.

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NICK CARTER: AMERICA'S GREATEST DETECTIVE, by Matthew T. Davis. Article in *THOSE WERE THE DAYS* No. 1 February 1972. This is a condensation of Nick Carter Weekly No. 534, Idayah, the Woman of Mystery; or, Nick Carter's Fourfold Problem.

FRANK MERRIWELL'S HEART; or, A Royal Thanksgiving, by Matthew T. Davis. Article in *THOSE WERE THE DAYS* No. 2, April 1972. Another condensation of a Merriwell story, this time No. 189 featuring a Thanksgiving Day football game between Harvard and Yale.

THE LIBERTY BOYS SETTLING OLD SCORES, by Matthew T. Davis. Another condensation of a dime novel in *THOSE WERE THE DAYS* No. 2 April 1972.

TOM SWIFT, AERONAUTICAL ENGINEER, by John T. Dizer, Jr. Article in *THOSE WERE THE DAYS* No. 2 April 1972. An excellent article giving a history of Tom Swift and his many aeronautical inventions. John Dizer is a regular contributor to the Roundup.

THOSE WERE THE DAYS is published bi-monthly by Garnett Publications, Division St, Derby, Conn. 06418. Your editor and publisher is editor. It features condensations of dime novels and other articles of interest to the nostalgic minded.

HORATIO ALGER: PIED PIPER ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS, by Ralph D. Gardner. A three-page article appearing in the January-February 1972 issue of *THE GALLERY*, a west-coast publication for antiques collectors. 3717 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, Calif. 94549. A nostalgic type article recalling the days when Alger was the American boy's favorite author and the recent reawakening of interest in Horatio.

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